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SURVIVING OUR INDUSTRY MELTDOWN

NOAH CHRISTMAN

When I graduated, diploma in hand, from Cal Poly's City and Regional Planning (CRP) department in the spring of 2005, I had a job ready and waiting for me at a well-respected residential architecture and urban-design firm in Orange County. I had committed the last five years of my life to the major, especially in the area of design planning, and the thought of entering the workforce with an opportunity to utilize all that I had learnt was wonderfully exciting (not to mention the draw of a steady paycheck).

When I first toyed with the idea of applying to Cal Poly, I expected my focus to be in the field of architecture; however, once I began to examine the courses offered within the CRP department, my choice of major was immediately evident. The department presented a broad-spectrum look at land planning, with the ability to focus more clearly on the areas of both policy and design as one saw fit. While courses in policy balanced out my education, I chose to dive headfirst into the design aspect of the major.

Introductory design courses lay a basic foundation, while ensuing classes expounded on that foundation, teaching the skills that would later become vital in the workforce. Going far beyond freehand drafting and computer expertise, these subsequent urban design courses offered insight into the end-user, an understanding of site analysis, and both project and team management skills that would not only enable me to obtain employment in the industry, but, as I would later find out, to excel.

In starting work the summer after graduation, the housing market was red-hot and I found myself immediately thrown into the fire. A significant project would be completed only to have three altogether more significant projects find their way to my desk. Regardless, the hours may have been long, but the frenetic pace of work and the brothers-in-arms nature of our team easily made it worthwhile. Within the first month I found myself managing several projects of my own and conferencing with clients, many with whom I would continue to work throughout my tenure at the firm. The next several months would result in the most prodigious amount of work I had ever seen and yield a great deal of truly exceptional product, from small-scale infill neighborhoods to broad-brush regional master plans.

Unfortunately, such a pace wouldn't last, and by the next year it was easily apparent that the market was already in the midst of a maelstrom. We continued to persevere, however, and the developers were not willing to

Figure 1

Noah was the first student at CRP who mastered SketchUp. This is his model for the Park Marina Area Plan which received an award from the Central Coast section of the APA in 2006. (See the article by Nicholas & del Rio in FOCUS 3, 2006)



fold—instead pushing back against the oncoming storm as if to force its change through sheer will. Still being fed with new projects, we continued to design for the neighborhoods and new towns of tomorrow, though we knew it was unlikely that they would ever be constructed. By the end of that year it was clear the axe was being sharpened. Early in 2007 the firm began shedding jobs, slowly at first, but with an increasingly rapid pace as the weeks progressed, and in November of the following year I found my own head on the chopping block.

Suddenly faced with an excess of time on my hands, I needed to find a way to spend it; more important, I needed to find a way to spend it wisely. I decided to write up a series of rules that I would use as a guide through the tumultuous times. The basis was simple: wait out the crash by bettering myself so as to be in a position to lead the pack when the tide of the economy shifted in our favor. Easier said than done? Not necessarily.

Rule #1. Don't Waste Your Time and Don't Settle

When you are unemployed, there is a lot of time to waste. However, as we all know, time is money, so I would have been a fool to waste it. Time is also precious, so it demands to be spent sensibly. Why then, would I waste it searching for jobs in an economic climate that was practically devoid of them? Or—provided I did find one—why would I settle for employment that would likely fail to benefit me in virtually any sense other than the collection of a paycheck? I figured that there had to be better ways to spend one's time than a potentially fruitless rummage through the ashes or performing unfulfilling work, and as such I decided upon the next rule.

Rule #2. Stay Current

When you're not in the trenches on a day-to-day basis it's amazing how much you truly miss; statistics, articles, facts, and market trends are always buzzing around, and if you can't keep up then you'll quickly fall behind. I had always prided myself on staying current, but with more time on my hands I was able to delve deeper. With the widespread advent of online news sources, it has become easier than ever to accumulate more than just a

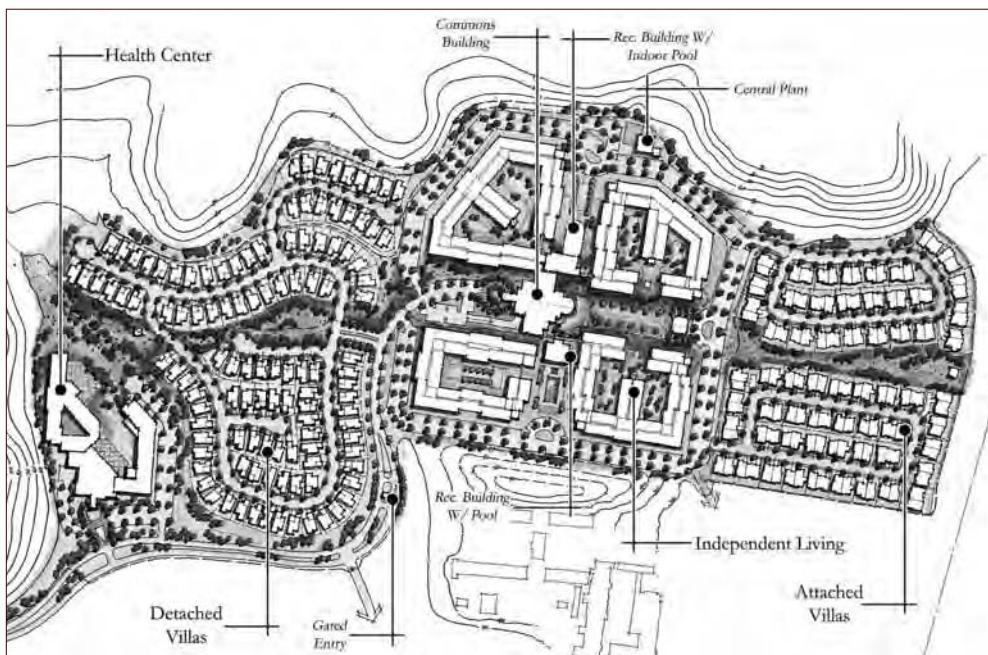


Figure 2

Active Adult Community, Marin County. An active adult community nestled in the foothills of Marin County, Calif. that provides a wide variety of on-site amenities and health services for residents and a variety of housing types - from detached villas to multi-story condominium buildings.

Noah Christman at KTG, 2007.

basic understanding of any number of subjects, and when combined with print sources such as daily newspapers and monthly journals it becomes incredibly simple to dissect any facet of any industry, while staying up-to-the-minute on trends, ideas, and technological advances. Subscribing to a multitude of newspapers, magazines, and online journals gave me an opportunity to fluently converse on a breadth of topics, but I needed to find a body of individuals with whom I could run a discourse, and one professional organization, in particular, fit the bill perfectly.



Figure 3

Delta Master Plan, Contra Costa County. Planned for the banks of the California Delta, this master planned community combines village-oriented residential living with major recreational amenities, including private dock access for many of the larger lots, all while preserving existing wetland pockets throughout the site. Noah Christman at KTG, 2008.

Rule #3. Connect, Connect, Connect

Throughout my tenure at my previous firm I had been marginally involved in the Orange County/Inland Empire District Council of the Urban Land Institute (ULI). Participation in the organization was a great way to learn about continuing trends, gather inside information, and fraternize with high-level company executives, but I never truly took advantage of even a fraction of its potential.

With an international scope, and a roster gathered from nearly every conceivable aspect of our industry, I chose to focus a great deal of energy on making connections within the organization, assuming that, sooner than later, these connections would be a benefit. Ultimately, my association within ULI allowed me to attain my final rule.

Rule #4. Stay Active Within the Industry

The connections I made within ULI served me more than I could have ever imagined. Soon I was producing reports covering topics such as high-speed rail, designing advertisements for upcoming programs, managing a team looking at edge development solutions, crafting a guidebook to help newly unemployed professionals survive the downturn, and serving on a panel to construct a development plan for a local, sustainability-oriented, charter school.

All the while I was offering planning and design services as a consultant to startup firms throughout the region. Sooner than later, work began to roll in, and what was just a trickle at first has, over the past few months, amounted to a torrent, including international projects in both Tanzania and China.

As of writing this, I'll have been officially unemployed for an entire year—mainly due to market conditions, but also partially as a result of my own rules (remember: never settle!)—but by personally sticking to these rules I have been able to quickly gain ground in a decimated industry.

Will I still be unemployed by the time you're reading this? Probably not. The pieces are starting to fall back into place: the stock market rebounded several months back, job loss has slowed to a rivulet when

compared to previous reports, and home sales have been slowly gaining momentum. As a result of this, I'll be back at a firm—at a job I truly desire—in no time. However, even if the gears crank a little more slowly than we'd all like, I know I'll still be in a fine position due to the fact that I've positioned myself at the head of the pack in an industry whose rise from the ashes is inevitable.

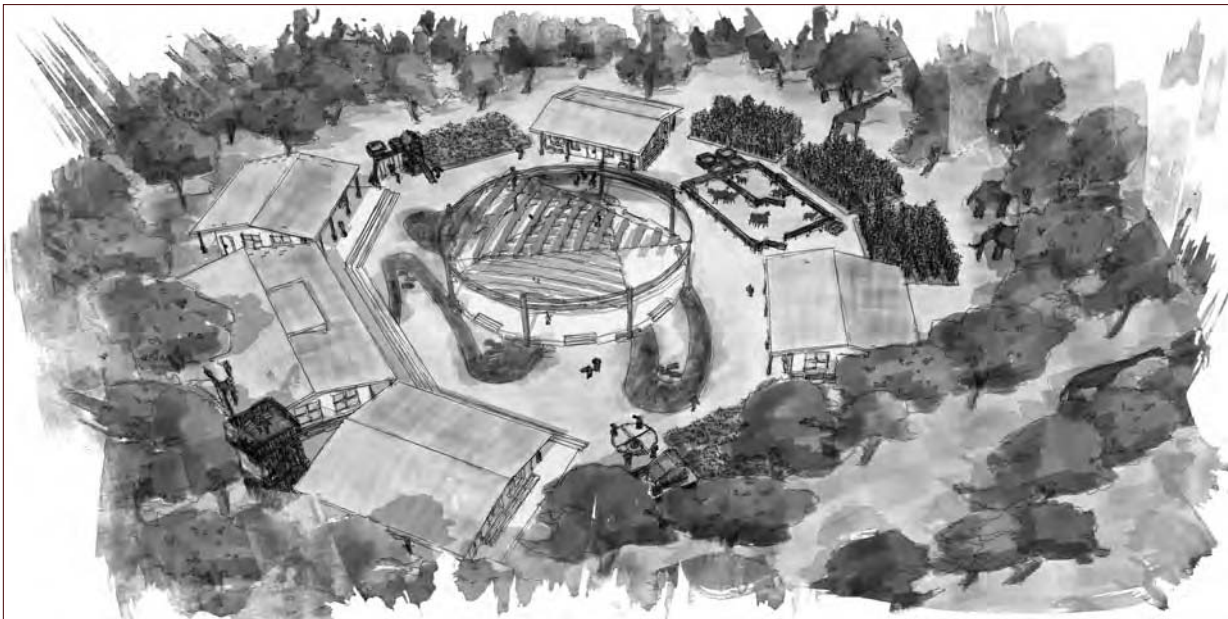


Figure 4

Living School Project, Tanzania. Designed in an effort to curb poaching and teach the sustainable use of land, in addition to an elementary school curriculum, for children in Tanzania's Pwani Region. Noah Christman in cooperation with FUZE | Community Design, 2009.